Commentary

COVID-19 and Indian frontline workers

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic of COVID-19 has posed challenges and revealed so many shortcomings in vision and execution of health system. Despite of threats, it has also given ample opportunities for improvement in health care delivery. Health professional of each category has contributed beyond their capability in curbing the pandemic. Frontline workers like health workers and accredited social health activist (ASHA) workers have worked at the grass root level and given their absolute best despite their already stringent work schedule and job profile. Already trusted with so many health programs and community activities, they have excelled in management of the pandemic. However, this has posed a serious question and threat to already burdened health system. The pandemic has further worsened already compromised plight of frontline health personnel. It is high time that appropriate consideration be given to such workers in order to improve health system. Some form of appreciation in terms of monetary benefits, some administrative commendation or welfare measures must be thought to recognize their sincere efforts.

Keywords: COVID-19, Frontline worker, Health personnel

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the world in a short span of time making the whole world stand still. Simple yet often neglected measures such as hand washing and social distancing have become significant.[1,2]

Perhaps first time in the history of mankind, "prevention is better than cure" has been realized in its true sense. As bigger as the threat COVID has posed, an even bigger response has been made across the world to curb the pandemic. All health personnel ranging from accredited social health activist (ASHA) worker to clinicians, laboratory personnel to scientists, all have stepped up during this unexpected situation and contributed more than their capability.[3] As much as the clinical health care personnel have provided care to the sick, the role of frontline workers who have directly worked in the community cannot be neglected.[4]

Challenges for frontline workers

Frontline workers are viewed as a backbone of health care system in India. Health workers and ASHA workers are usually the first contact of community with the health system. Frontline workers are assigned many significant jobs as their routine work profile such as antenatal and postnatal care, immunization, family planning services, treatment of common ailments, implementation of national health programs at most peripheral level, screening of diseases, field visits, health surveys, observation of health days, being part of village level committees, generation of awareness, health promotion, data compilation and reporting and countless other things.[5,6] However, during pandemic the already overburdened workers have been further assigned additional responsibilities like active case finding, contact tracing, awareness generation, care of home isolated patients, vaccination, disposal of dead bodies etc. apart from their routine work.[7] Despite this

additional load, frontline workers have contributed more than enough to take care of health of the community at their own physical and mental expense.

However, there are some constraints which are challenging the working of frontline health personnel. It has been more than a year now, when India began its battle against pandemic. Health workers have become tired and exhausted after working constantly. Long duty hours, emergencies during odd timings, vaccination drive, additional jobs during these testing times have taken a toll on them, both physically and mentally.[4] Many governments have prohibited the leaves for health personnel and allowing leaves only on extraordinary grounds. Moreover, due to depleted human health resource, many workers are not only working at their own place of posting but also have been deployed to vacant health institutions. Their family life is also getting affected due to such emergent situations. Without adequate renumerations and additional monetary benefits they are providing health services to the community, literally at their doorsteps.

Unfortunately, many health workers have also turned COVID positive which has affected their own health and also succumbed while battling the infection.[8] Their family members are getting affected with the disease. Even disheartening to see is that instead of getting appreciation, many frontline health workers are getting harassed, embarrassed, misbehaved, threatened and even assaulted by community while discharging their duties.[9,10]

Initiatives for frontline workers

Since the pandemic began, frontline workers have been recognized as a key element in this fight. They have been labeled as "corona warriors" and "corona fighters" by the masses, administration, public representatives and media. Appreciation in terms of rewarding them by means of certificates, mementos has been carried out at different levels by different organizations.[11] Nominal incentives have also been awarded to the front-line workers such as ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers for their added work during the pandemic.[12] Certain insurance schemes have also been announced for the frontline workers keeping in mind any their adverse health outcomes while performing their duties.[13] Such frontline health personnel were also vaccinated against COVID-19 on the priority basis and were one of the earliest recipients when the program was launched.[14] Appreciation in any form tends to lift the morale of the workers and motivates them to perform with dedication.

Recommendations

While showering flowers and awarding health workers on stage looks great on media, these things sometimes are not enough to keep health workers engaged in this long fight. With each passing day, workers are getting more and more exhausted both physically and mentally. Working long hours without any holidays or vacations has further compromised their situation, demanding certain welfare measures for them. First of all, adequate human resource should be ensured at all levels. Despite so many years after independence, the proportion of health care personnel to population is far from acceptable, let alone recommended. So, recruitment of health personnel should be expedited and prioritized. Expenditure in health should be enhanced and a good chunk of GDP should be allocated keeping current circumstances in mind.

Respectable emoluments instead of meagre incentives must be provided to health care workers. Considering essentiality of health services, permanent recruitments should be made into different health cadres rather than appointing workers on contract or outsourcing on need basis. Ample rest, vacations and duties on rotation basis must be ensured to avoid exhaustion of the frontline workers. Appreciation and recognition at all levels must be accorded to the workers; exceptional and extra-ordinary personnel must be awarded. If any worker or their close family member gets infected, their treatment should be prioritized and dedicated beds should be identified for them in health institutions. Jobs for wards of workers who succumb while discharging their duties should be reserved as a homage to their supreme sacrifice during this unexpected occurrence. Frontline health personnel have always been an integral part of health system and without a shadow of a doubt, they have worked extremely hard in this pandemic phase. It is high time we recognize and appreciate their valiant efforts, protect them and do something for their welfare.

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